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'Cinderella' or 'Beauty': English phonetics teaching/reception in an Algerian setting

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Abstract

The field of Phonetics has witnessed an avalanche of research conducted towards an enhancement of Second Language Teaching/Learning (henceforth, SLT/L) and many postulates have been advanced as far as 'pronunciation lacunas' and/or 'feats' are concerned. Pouring in the same vessel, the present paper is keyed to demonstrate, through a comparative study between some Arabic and English Phonetic aspects, that diagnosing so many of the predicaments stepping against any positive reception of the field at stake, may help in launching a mammoth process through which SLL will be geared towards a better reception or, say, a fair practice of English Phonetics by Algerian University learners.

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1. Introduction

The present paper is not intended as a full-blown redefinition of the precepts of Phonetics, but rather as a premise to some personal reflections as regards English Phonetics teachability/learnability and its reception by SL learners. It is, particularly, keyed to enfeeble the pre-existing postulate which accentuates the dearth of research in Phonetics and which metaphorizes it as the 'Cinderella' of English studies. But before all, I would like to launch this discussion with a telling lamentation by George Bernard Shaw in a Preface to Pygmalion (quoted in Mary Lou Marsoun Cancio & Sadanand Singh, 2007, p.1), where he

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quite heartedly avers that: 'The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it. They cannot spell it because they have nothing to spell it with but an old foreign alphabet with which only the consonants – and not all of them – have any agreed speech value. Consequently, no man can teach himself what it should sound like from reading it.'

This is unsurprisingly true if we consider the mismatch 'tinting' English spelling to its pronunciation. Besides, I think that the hallmark of all the meeting points should be a class or a lecture devoted to the illogical nature of English as a foreign language. This applies to sounds as well as to lexis if we believe Steven Pinker (2000, p.4) for whom: 'English is a zany, logic-defying tongue in which one drives on a parkway and parks in a driveway, plays at a recital and recites at a play.' Besides, 'If our spoken speech could be accurately represented by the English alphabet, then we would have no need for a phonetic alphabet. Although we have only some 40 sounds in English, we have more than 200 ways of spelling them using our alphabet' says Mary Lou Marsoun Cancio (2007, p.1)

Paradoxically, the first endeavour in teaching the internal logic of Phonetics, I guess, is to highlight the external non-logic of the language it "transcribes". The second key move to make is to visualize the vowels and consonants as specialized images as heeded by Timothy Donaldson (2008) in her Preface: 'Words are perceived as silhouette image-shapes…, and writing is a highly evolved and specialized form of drawing…'

This takes us back to the *generic* nature of the alphabet. There are many alphabets, and learners should be well aware of that. In 1886, the International Phonetic Association worked on a sound-symbol system inspired from a former alphabet developed by the British phonetician Henry Sweet. This was done with the unique aim of mapping the sounds of all the languages existing in the world and permitting a lucid interaction between different phoneticians. This goes hand in hand with the tenets of Globalization where "neighborhood" at all levels is championed. Mind at this juncture that in the present world, pronunciation is never an end in itself but a "mandatory" means to negotiate meaning or to achieve "comfortable intelligibility" to use Kenworthy's 1987 own term.

Not less important is the learner's profile. There are some learners who may "pick up" the rules of pronunciation through repeated exposures with the mentor, and others who simply do not have the knack, or, say, who need acoustic "consciousness raising". And this is another point to consider.

The difference between a voiced and a voiceless consonant is somehow easy to describe. It can even be evidenced by diagrams or illustrations making the vibration/non-vibration of the vocal cords eminent. Here, we can say that this phonetic phenomenon is "teachable". On the other hand, more attitudinal functions like those of intonation hinge thoroughly on the learner's initiatives. In other terms, they are part of what is dubbed the learnability factor. Peter Roach (1991) does corroborate this emphasis on what should be taught in phonetics and what should be left to the appreciation of the learner in what follows:

…Of the rules and generalizations that could be made about conveying attitudes through intonation, those which are not actually wrong are likely to be too trivial to be worth learning…the complexity of the total set of sequential and prosodic components of intonation and of paralinguistic features makes it a very difficult thing to teach…the attitudinal use of intonation is something that is best acquired through talking with and listening to English speakers… (Quoted in Christiane Dalton & Barbara Seidlhofer, 2011, p.72)

Globalization, I believe, might be at the service of a new phonetics. Because if we consider the above mentioned "demeanour" of the English language with the logic-driven linguistic behaviour of the learners who follow their instinct in spelling a word, then, many people will be sharing the same no more logic-defying code. Living in a global world will but "buttress" their will to abandon the old established alphabet and to follow the one which sounds less discomforting and more rewarding in "hard times", namely those of exams. It would be easier, I guess, for a student to pronounce every sound as it appears or simply not consider it in spelling. Yet, this is not our concern. What I intend to develop in this paper is the reason of the witnessed attitudes by learners towards this very field, and the way to step over them.

2. Brief Notes on the SL vs. TL Phonetic Systems

It is sheer truism that the language we resort to in our give and take of conversation, our mother tongue, is the best harness of our thought but also of our joyful and despondent moments. It, arguably, subscribes under the *affect*, which obviously has an *effect* on our 'linguistic machine'. To define a mother tongue, the reader is sometimes sent to the notion of "foreign language", as it is the case for instance in the Dictionnaire de didactique des langues (1976, p.198) where it is heeded that: 'L'apprentissage en milieu scolaire de toute langue naturelle autre que L1 relève de la pédagogie d'une langue non maternelle ou 'étrangère' quel que soit le statut officiel de cette langue dans la communauté où vit l'élève.'(The learning in schools of any natural language other than L1 has to do with the pedagogy of a non-mother tongue or a 'foreign' one whatever the official status of this language is in the community where the pupil lives.) (My translation)

Subsequently, a mother tongue is a language which might be attributed the value specification [– foreign]. However, this seemingly unambiguous postulate acquires a particular complexity when it is contextualized. This is what enticed a good number of linguists, Daems and Herlitz (Quoted in J., Gagné, M. Page and E., Tarrab, 1990, p. 15) among others, to underwrite: "l'impossibilité d'en arriver à une notion de langue maternelle qui soit univoque et universellement admise" (The impossibility to reach a notion of mother tongue which would be unambiguous and universally agreed upon) (My translation)

Far from the inexhaustible debates which try to establish an ultimate definition of the mother tongue, I would rather wonder about its impact on the process of S/FL. At first sight, what we can spot is that both Arabic and English descend from different family trees. Hence, the two criteria of syntactic structures and vocabulary thanks to which we can instigate this grouping are blurred. If we look closely at what tears the two phonetic systems apart, we can see that it is in essence the vocalic scheme branding each tongue which has *de facto* far reaching implications for learners' pronunciation.

While the Arabic vocalic alphabet is triangularly shaped (/a/, /u/, /i/), English encapsulates 12 vowels rather. These reflect discrepancies as far as length and degrees of aperture are concerned. What I have personally witnessed in my phonetics classes is a reticence from the part of students in using the altogether long and open vowels. This basically falls under a personal attitude linked to the habitual practice of their mother tongue in some cases, and to the fear of sounding female-like (for boys) or to look like showing-off in others.

The consonantal aspect, on the other hand, puts students in front of sounds which remain silent in particular phonetic environments, and which acquire a "voice" in some others. Such is the case for bough and *laugh* or sigh and *tough*. The "*gh*" just like the "*th*" is very problematic for non-native speakers. Take the famous example of *Thames* compared to *theme*. In this connection, Sara Laviosa (2010, pp.30-1) humorously attracts our attention to the difficulty of pronouncing the voiceless fricative "*th*" thanks to "How to be British" series of postcards. The lesson includes six clues which start by placing the tip of the tongue behind the top teeth and ends by consulting a dentist after having tried to utter: the Smiths wear thin clothes throughout the winter months. It is no exaggeration to say that the sentence demands a real 'gymnastics of the tongue'.

Subsequently, and to come back to the non-logical tie spinning users to their tongue, consider that an Algerian student who has been brought up in a "phonenclature-like" tradition in which each letter refers to a definite sound, will predictably meet some difficulties to espouse a "phonetic plurenclature" as I would call both traditions; hence, a caginess in learning the discipline.

A third quandary has to do with the misuse of English allophones. A telling example could be the phoneme /l/ with its two allophones: the clear [l] and the dark [ɬ]. A great number of students do not pronounce the dark [ɬ] when found at the end, for the mere reason that in Arabic there is no such occurrence. This is quintessentially why we usually obtain a weird production in oral examinations for

instance, where students concentrate on the grammar and syntax of the language and sidetrack its "musicality" which is factually the spirit of it. And this is how we meet with words like "lull" and "fill" produced with a front movement of the tongue, since in Arabic we say /li:l/ "night" and /fi:l/ "elephant" with the same frontal aspect for instance.

3. Corpus Analysis

To backup the aforementioned claims, a short questionnaire had been devised to assess the main frustrations punctuating the task of 10 university teachers (5 males and 5 females with no less than 7 years of experience) as far as phonetics teaching is concerned. The queries were as follows:

1/ Is phonetics an easy discipline to teach?
2/ What are the main obstacles met by the teacher?
3/ What are the major learners' lacunas in this field?
4/ Do you think that living in an era of globalization affects learners' feedback and/or practice? And eventually,
5/ What do you suggest to enhance your teaching of phonetics?

Surprisingly, and despite the difficulties to be mentioned next, 8 of them said that they do not find the discipline too hard to teach, the remaining 2 advanced a categorical "yes". As regards the second question, all of them came to mention transcription, stress, the existence of no exact rules and the abundance of exceptions, the absence of definite learning strategies, as well as the varieties tingeing the English language. The lacunas touch pronunciation, particularly an accumulation of mispronunciations inherited from middle and high schools, vowels and diphthongs as mentioned before, intonation, and finally, some difficulties to decipher the phonetic symbols. All of the 10 teachers agreed that globalization might come in very handy in making non-native sound production come abreast the native one. To endorse its teaching, the teachers proposed the use of laboratories where students can access recordings, movies and documentaries in English, listening to programs on websites devoted to pronunciation, specific books to assess their performance. In short, acoustic and visual means are of prima facie importance in "sounds' province".

Yet, and as we usually say, diagnosing the problem is halfway its solution. One should not be disheartened by the aforementioned hitches. In addition, what may ease things in the process of teaching it is its concrete aspect. Currently, teachers are coping with the means at hand. Basically, books, diagrams and even phonetically teasing poems. But I would propose manuals with 3D organs of speech positions whose aim is to attract today's generation attention and to give them a real pulse as far as English 'resonance' is concerned.

4. Conclusion

If meaning is the very furniture of the world, sounds are what contribute to its coziness. Actually, an accurate emission of sounds shapes the fluidity as well as the intelligibility of peoples' interactions. Unsurprisingly, these are bona fides when emitters are being assessed in academic institutions. What I tried to highlight in the abovementioned points is that there is an undeniable influence of Algerian students' mother tongue, first, on their attitude vis-à-vis the phonetic aspects of English, second, on their production of it. We know that the world has tremendously changed, especially when it comes to introducing technology in classes. Unfortunately, not all classes can afford that, but there is an urgent need to change the traditional method of teaching phonetics as a physically-driven science.

Teachers should shift the tide from theoretically describing sounds to students to technically visualizing them thanks to special means. This might exert an enchanted pull on learners who will be

more attracted by the discipline at stake. Metaphorically speaking, I hope that the mentioned proposals will operate as a magic wand that will magically transform phonetics from being the "Cinderella" of English studies into their "Beauty".

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